

The Old Time Religion How Harmful Is It?

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 20, 1952

AS a matter of historical fact, what is commonly called 'the old time religion' is not really old at all. It began in the eighteenth century and became a widespread phenomenon by about the middle of the nineteenth, though only in the English-speaking countries. In the British Isles, it owed its appeal very largely to the discontent of the oppressed classes during the harsh transitions of the early stages of the industrial revolution. The established churches made no attempt to reach these classes and were hostile to the efforts of those few of their clergy, such as the Wesleys, who did try to reach them. Thus there arose a homespun sort of evangelism, the agents of which were uneducated but fervent lay preachers who combined a dramatized Protestant theology with an ardent emotionalism which proved very attractive to the wretched victims of rural poverty and industrial servitude.

Across the Atlantic, the new evangelism had native roots in preaching like that of Jonathan Edwards, of Massachusetts, but was also influenced by the 'revival' in England. Spreading rapidly west with the advancing frontier, and south among Negro slaves and the less educated of their masters, it soon took on American coloration. It was also absorbed to a considerable extent by the more settled denominations, with the exception, perhaps, of the Episcopalians, Lutherans and Unitarians.

By the end of the nineteenth century, it seemed to its adherents, who were not interested in church history, that their own evangelism was the only ancient and authentic form of Christianity. So they called it 'the old time religion.' In one of their hymns they sang that it was "good enough for Moses," although Moses is considered to have been a Jew who

lived 1200 years before Christianity was founded. They also sang that it was "good enough for Joshua," the primitive Hebrew general who ordered the massacre of every man, woman and child in the city of Jericho. Details like these did not detain them. All Biblical heroes were retroactive converts to their own salvationism which thus became 'the old time religion.'

The spirit of equalitarianism which had produced the American and French Revolutions expressed itself in England as indicating, among other things, the equality of all men in their ability to understand the Bible. This meant that anyone who was equipped with a simplified version of the Protestant theology could preach salvation as he found it, or believed he found it, in the Scriptures. In this he was much assisted by the doctrinal content of the new hymns produced by the 'revival.'

This assertion of equality was readily adopted in America: the Divine Revelation was a democratic disclosure and the learned and the ignorant were equal in their exposition of the Bible. Indeed, ignorance was an advantage since learning was very largely devised by the devil. Meanwhile, in the United States as in England, the more established churches, including, unfortunately, those which were emancipating themselves from dogmatism, had lost touch with the common people, and thus the new salvationism, which had come to be called 'the old time religion,' had the field very largely to itself. It was only with atheism and agnosticism that it had to contend—which, in the middle part of the nineteenth century, had become widespread and extremely vocal. This, in outline, is the story of how we got the 'old time religion.'

Its content is in essence fairly simple. The basic assumption is the comparative unimportance of the present life and preoccupation with a future one. The essential thing is to keep out of hell and make sure of going to heaven. To achieve this, it is necessary to believe that the human world, although intended by God to be good, has long been the scene of subversive activity. The leader of this activity is Satan, an arch-conspirator who has been immensely successful in obtaining converts to his party. Even those who have not actually signed up, such as the majority of church members, are likely to be fellow-travelers, and the clergy themselves are almost always guilty by association.

Because of the success of Satan, we are all sinners, in rebellion against God. We are therefore condemned, as decreed by God's justice, to spend eternity in hell, which is a fate we fully deserve because of our treason. To become resigned to it, however, would be unfortunate, because hell is very disagreeable. It is true that the company is likely to be stimulating, but the climate is too torrid to permit us to enjoy it. Indeed, the heat is so great that, upon entering, we burst immediately into flames and remain

incandescent forever thereafter, our only satisfaction being that we are defying the second law of thermodynamics.

Happily, this fate is avoidable. God has sent into the world his only Son to suffer punishment in place of us. Since his Son lived a perfect life, his death is a complete atonement. If we believe this, and after repenting our sins submit ourselves to God in Three Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, our consignment to hell will be cancelled and we shall be admissible to heaven.

As to the exact character of heaven, there has heretofore been a certain amount of doubt, perhaps because it is not as well lighted as hell. This doubt, I am happy to say, has recently been removed. An evangelist, at present preaching to large audiences in America, is reported in the newspapers to have described heaven as a 1600-mile cube. That is to say, it is 1600 miles long, 1600 miles wide, and 1600 miles high. This rather lofty ceiling is presumably for convenience in flight. The boundaries of heaven are surmounted with battlements, the purpose of which is not stated, but perhaps even in heaven there is some danger of aggression. Entrance is by a pearly gate on the east, the dimensions of which are not given.

"Along the streets of gold," the evangelist tells us, "Jesus drives up and down in a jeweled chariot" except when "conferring in the great council hall with God the Father and God the Holy Ghost." It is a little disturbing to be informed that formal conferences are found necessary between the three persons of the Trinity, and one wonders whether, during these conferences, the residents of heaven may be uneasy. Moreover, according to orthodox theology, the three persons of the Trinity are completely reconciled on all subjects, being in fact one God, and so one feels a little startled that there is anything left to discuss.

However, it is possible in heaven, apparently, just as on earth, to set aside your curiosity and think of something else, and so our interest is deflected to the fascinating assertion that the trees of heaven bear a different kind of fruit each month. Most of us have probably never thought of food in heaven, but the idea having been put into our heads, perhaps we shall hope that the diet is not entirely vegetarian. The evangelist is a hearty looking man. Why should he not promise us cherries that resemble mushrooms, to be eaten with apples that taste like steak?

Exactly where heaven is located is not revealed. A 1600-mile cube tangible enough to have streets and ramparts, council halls and orchards, is a quite substantial object. Does it rest on the atmosphere, the stratosphere, the ionosphere, or merely fall through space?

Well, perhaps it is not fair to press these questions too far. We are

all entitled to our speculations. And the 'old time religion' does concern itself with other things than heaven and hell. It converts people, for instance, from gambling and drunkenness to quiet living, or at least it used to do so; and it sometimes makes them kinder in their daily lives. It certainly did this on the American frontier. Settlements that were wild and lawless became decent and orderly. It is said to have saved England, in the eighteenth century, from a violent revolution. Its influence has in many ways been good. Is there any harm in it?

I am afraid there is. A religion must be judged, not by what it did in earlier times and in the absence of available alternatives, but by what it does in the present. Even the most primitive of religions were useful in their own day. But each in turn was superseded; its time of usefulness was past and it had become harmful. This is what has now happened to the 'old time religion.'

In the first place, the 'old time religion' is intellectually unbelievable; modern science and modern psychology have made it obsolete. Its assertions from the beginning were based on ignorance, even ignorance of the true nature of the Bible, which has been made known to us by a host of scholars, men of spiritual quality as well as intellectual honesty, as in the case, for instance, of the saintly scholar, Albert Schweitzer. Preachers of the 'old time religion' are trained but not educated; they are taught to reproduce what has been given them and to do it with maximum emotional effect. They do not know the world of modern knowledge. They have made no genuine study of religion. And as we have indicated, even the Bible upon which they rely so heavily is not the real Bible, but the Bible upon which they have imposed the salvationist fantasy.

This is harmful because it asserts as knowledge what at most is improbable conjecture. Heaven and hell, the description of God, the provision of a supernatural salvation—all these, at best, are mere assertions. The evangelist treats conjecture as though it were verified fact, and then demands that people stake their lives on what, in ignorance, he has asserted. It reminds me of the story told of Billy Sunday. Being in a strange city, and wanting to mail some letters, he called to a small boy and asked his way to the post office. The boy directed him. "Now, you're a real smart boy," said Mr. Sunday, "if you will come to that big tent, out by the park, at eight o'clock tonight, I'll tell you the way to heaven." "Aw shucks," said the boy, "you don't even know the way to the post office."

Now, the effect of accepting as knowledge what is only speculation and trying to put it *at the center of your life* is sure to be confusion. The

real world is all about you. The world of genuine knowledge will invade your mind. It will become harder and harder to believe—really and inwardly to believe—what actually is fantasy. Many a young person is undermined by this attempt during his years in college. What his mind must reject his religious conditioning has attached him to; his rational self and his emotional self are in conflict. This may result in anything from a damaging cynicism to a mental breakdown. I have seen both these results, the first many times, the second occasionally, and almost everything between them.

It is a conflict, be it noted, not merely in the intellect but in the conscience. Truth requires that evidence be believed and that the false be rejected. And so, in this respect, conscience is on the side of science and modern knowledge and against the 'old time religion.' But conscience has been conditioned by the 'old time religion.' If the beliefs are discarded, a guilt feeling emerges. One has betrayed the religion he learned from his mother and from the evangelists his mother esteemed. Thus there is confusion in conscience and this is the worst confusion of all. If we want to know what it leads to, we will find case histories in many of the books about abnormal psychology.

The second kind of harm that the 'old time religion' does is to implant guilt feelings in the young, for which there is no basis, and then when they are older stir up these guilt feelings, which have now become complexes. If, for instance, you tell a child that because of his sins the Son of God who loves him had to die, and then describe to the child the horror of the crucifixion, you have made that child feel guilty of the death of Jesus. This is an evil thing to do and altogether inexcusable. The child did not cause the death of Jesus at all, and this whole interpretation of the death of Jesus is a nightmare, a hideous and horrible fantasy.

If this guilt feeling thus implanted is associated, as it is almost certain to be, with the child's relationship to his parents, especially the mother, and if the child comes to believe that sin is mostly concerned with sex, which is very likely in a home dominated by the 'old time religion,' the child may become an emotional cripple, incapable of marriage, or if married, too neurotic to make a success of it. Once the damage is done, it is very difficult to cure it. The psychiatrists will testify to this. Emotional cripples who are made such by the evangelists are never cured by evangelists; they end up in the psychiatrist's office, or come for help to the liberal minister.

One thing more about the implanting of guilt feelings. Once these feelings are established in the child, they can be stirred up in the adult, and that is what the evangelist does at his meetings. Reconciliation with

God through Christ temporarily relieves these guilt feelings by emotional catharsis and the individuals concerned feel 'saved.' But since the guilt feelings are certain to return as soon as the individual succumbs to what he thinks are evil thoughts, or begins to doubt the truth of his religion, or becomes involved again in whatever it is that is obsessional, nothing has been gained. What was needed was insight, re-education of the conscience, rational understanding, the perception of genuine values in morality and character—instead of which there was emotional debauch.

A further harm the 'old time religion' does is the siphoning off of moral energy. While people are devoting themselves to keeping out of hell in the next world, they do nothing to cure the hell in this. They pray to God to make the world more righteous when that is what God requires that they themselves shall do. When they start praying, they stop thinking, which is surely just the opposite of what the God they pray to is entitled to expect. Prayer is not for the purpose of stimulating God to get about his business. Presumably he is wise enough to know what he ought to be doing and conscientious enough to be already doing it. If not, he is not much of a God and all praying is irrelevant. Clearly, the purpose of prayer is to get *us* going about *our* business, which at present has less to do with insuring ourselves against hell hereafter than with getting rid of some of the hell that's here. Instead of prayers that, if he hears them, must disgust God with flattery and bore him with platitudes, why not some prayerful thinking about the moral issues in humanity's present predicament?

For religion to be effective in the age into which we have now entered, it must give up being infantile. The time has come for religion to grow up. What is needed today is mature minds and grown-up souls. We shall not be helped by a religion that tells us that God or Christ will do for us what God and Christ expect us to do for ourselves. We don't want a religion that terrifies children with hell and fills their minds with the horrors of the crucifixion. That is not the way Jesus dealt with children. He took them up in his arms and blessed them. He loved them and wanted them to be happy. He knew that happy people are likely to be good.

We need a religion, not of escape but of courage. We *cannot* escape, even if we would. The hell that we must try to avoid is the one that will rain down upon us from the skies if we are not wise enough, strong enough and benevolent enough, to win the struggle for freedom, justice and brotherhood without involving the world in limitless calamity. The hell conjured up in the fantasies of religion has no place in the world of modern knowledge: science has got rid of it. Let religion now help to get rid of the hell that science has made possible, a very real one. Let

religion inspire honest and persistent thought until we find the answers to our problems. Let religion instil courage and endurance. Let religion give us mature minds and brave and generous hearts. Let religion reveal the power of God within us and teach us the love of God by teaching us to love each other.

The religion we need is not the life-denying creeds of yesterday but the faith that God who thinks with human minds and works with human hands and loves with human hearts can make us good enough and brave enough and great enough to leave the past behind and march together through the present storms towards the nobler, happier, better world that only honest faith and useful righteousness can build.

Prayer: O God, whose truth we make so difficult, give us the spirit of simplicity, so that we can see the truth that is all about us, and humility enough to take it to our hearts. Amen.

SUBSCRIPTION
1952-53

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Printed for

THE PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

All Souls' Church (Unitarian)

Sixteenth and Harvard Streets N.W.

Washington 9, D. C.

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